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AUTHOR Rasinski, Timothy V.; And Others
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ABSTRACT

In order to test the efficacy of having college students read texts in which phrase boundaries are explicitly cued, the phrased text treatments were administered to 42 college students from 3 developmental reading courses in one southeastern university. An experimental group was given the phrased texts, while a control group was given the conventionally formatted texts. A brief true-false quiz followed each reading of a text to insure that the subjects were reading for meaning. Results indicated that the phrased text treatment did not lead to any better (or worse) comprehension on the conventional texts for the experimental group. Although both groups increased their reading rate over the course of the treatment, the increase in rate for the control group was significantly greater than for the experimental group. (A table of data is included and 21 references are attached.) (JK)

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Timothy V. Rasinski
309 Aderhold Hall
University of Georgia
Athens, Georgia 30602
(404) 542-7865

Donna Mealey
University of Georgia

Cynthia Hynd
University of Georgia

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The Effects of Reading Phrased Texts on Readers' Comprehension and Fluency An Exploratory Study

Sensitivity to phrase boundaries while reading appears to be an important aspect of reading (Brown & Miron, 1971; Grosjean, Grosjean & Lane 1979; Johnson, 1965; Kleiman, Winograd & Humphrey, 1979; Suci, 1967). Reading authorities have argued that the reader's ability to read in chunked or phrase-like textual units is necessary for fluent, proficient reading (Allington, 1983; Harris and Sipay, 1985; Kleiman, Winograd, and Humphrey, 1979; O'Shea and Sindelar, 1983. Schreiber, 1980). Sensitivity to phrase boundaries in reading has been shown to be developmental in nature (Aulls, 1977. Clay & Imlach, 1971; Kowal, O'Connell, O'Brien & Bryant, 1975; Resnick, 1970; Rode, 1974-1975). As readers mature they become more proficient at reading in larger syntactic chunks. Phrase sensitivity has also been shown to be a factor that distinguishes between good and poor readers (Aulls, 1977; Clay & Imlach, 1971; Eagen. 1975; Kleiman, Winograd & Humphrey, 1979; Oakan, Weiner & Cromer, 1971; Rasinski, 1985). In the Kleiman, Winograd, and Humphrey study. for example, good fourth grade readers were more able to identify phrase boundaries in texts than poor readers.

Because fluent readers read texts in phrase-like units, teaching non-fluent readers to read in phrases has been advocated by reading authorities for some time (e.g. Durrell, 1940). Prominent among the suggestions for instruction has been practice in reading phrases in isolation (Dolch, 1949). One line of research by Amble (Amble, 1966

1967; Amble & Kelly, 1970; Amble & Muehl, 1966), for example, found improvements in reading comprehension for students exposed to an experimental treatment of viewing tachistoscopically presented phrases. More recently, approaches that are more contextual in nature have been advocated (Allington, 1983). One of these approaches involves the overt cueing of phrase boundaries in written texts for the reader. In this approach, phrase boundaries in the text are overtly marked in some way.

Recent investigations into the use of phrase-marked reading passages have been successful within the scope of the investigations (Frase & Schwartz, 1979; Gerrell and Mason, 1983; Gregory, 1986; Mason & Kendall, 1979; McBride, 1976; O'Shea & Sindelar, 1983; Stevens, 1981; Weiss, 1983). In these studies subjects read texts that had phrase boundaries marked by exaggerated spacing, slash marks embedded in the texts, or the ends of lines of texts. In general, when compared with their reading conventional texts, students reading the phrase marked texts demonstrated significant improvement in their performances on both comprehension and fluency measures. Such effects were particularly evident with less fluent readers.

In order for the phrased text treatment to have any practical significance for reading instruction, however, the facilitation induced by the phrased text treatment needs to transfer to conventionally formatted texts. Unfortunately, in the above mentioned studies, transference was never tested.

The objective of the present exploratory study was to test the efficacy of having college students read texts in which phrase boundaries are explicitly cued. The main issue addressed was the transfer effect of the experimental treatment from phrased to conventional forms of texts.

Method

Subjects

Forty-two college students from three developmental reading courses in a university in the Southeastern United States participated in the study. Students in these classes were identified as having reading/study problems based upon their SATV scores and high school grade point averages, and upon their performance on a university constructed reading proficiency examination prior to entrance into the university. Each class was randomly divided into experimental and control groups. Twenty-one students were assigned to the experimental phrased text treatment and 21 were assigned to the control non-phrased treatment.

Materials

Eight experimental texts were developed for the study. The texts were selected from contemporary literature for young adults and ranged in readability from 7th to 12th grades. For each text phrase boundaries were identified using a consensus technique similar to the one described by Weiss (1982). In this technique a panel of judges read and identified intrasentential pause boundaries within the texts. Pause boundaries identified by over two-thirds of the judges were selected as required phrase boundaries. In the experimental texts the

required phrase boundaries were graphically highlighted in the texts by placing slash marks at the appropriate places. Slash marks were used to cue phrase boundaries. This was based upon an earlier instructional recommendation by Allington (1983).

The same texts were also used with the subjects in the control group. This group, however, was presented with texts in a conventional format.

Procedures

Prior to the actual treatment all subjects were pretested on reading rate and comprehension using the The Nelson Denny Reading Test, Form E.

All treatments were administered during the normal reading class periods for the subjects. All treatments were administered by the regular instructor. Prior to the treatment it was explained to the subjects that proper phrasing during reading was important for successful reading comprehension and fluency. Subjects were told that in some texts phrase boundaries were marked. Subjects with those texts were instructed to use those cues to guide their phrased reading. On Monday through Thursday for two consecutive weeks subjects were given one of the treatment texts to read. The texts were administered in order from easiest to most difficult in terms or readability. Subjects in the experimental treatment were given the phrased texts while subjects in the control group were given the conventionally formatted texts. In order to insure that the subjects would be reading for meaning, a brief true-false quiz was administered after each reading of a text. All students were timed during their readings. Students

recorded their times at the top of their comprehension check answer sheets and were advised to try to decrease their time from session to session while maintaining adequate comprehension. Otherwise, no instruction in improving reading rate was given.

On the Monday following the the final treatment students were administered a posttest. Subjects were administered the Nelson Denny Reading Test, Form F. Measures of reading comprehension and rate were taken. Subjects in the experimental reading group were also administered a questionnaire that attempted to determine their affective response to reading the phrased text.

Results and Discussion

Means and standard deviations for all measures were calculated and are displayed in Table 1. In order to determine if significant differences between groups existed in comprehension and reading rate due to treatments, analyses of covariance was conducted for both variables. Pretests for comprehension and reading rate were used as covariates.

Insert Table 1 About Here

The analysis of covariance for comprehension indicated that no significant differences were detected $F(1,39) = .05$, $p > .05$. For reading rate, however, the analysis of covariance indicated that significant differences were apparent between treatment groups $F(1, 37) = 4.77$, $p < .05$.

The results indicate that the phrased text treatment did not lead to any better (or worse) comprehension on the conventional texts for the experimental group. For both groups reading rate improved over the course of the treatment. The increase in rate for the control group, however, was significantly greater than for the experimental group. Although both groups increased their rate of reading the experimental group increased at a slower rate.

The lack of significant effects for comprehension suggest two possibilities. First, the phrased text treatment does not lead to improvements in comprehension. Although reading texts that are phrased may improve comprehension on those texts, such reading does not transfer to conventional texts. An alternative and more plausible explanation is that the treatment involved in this study was not sufficient in terms of intensity or duration to lead readers to process or comprehend texts any differently than they had in the past. The experimental treatment consisted of reading eight phrased passages over the course of two weeks. During this period the students in both treatment groups were also reading many selections written in a conventional format. It seems quite likely that any gains in comprehension due to a treatment consisting of reading phrased texts cannot be made over brief periods with low intensity treatments.

At first glance the treatment effects on reading rate may seem baffling. Both groups increased their reading rates, with the control group increasing its rate to a greater degree than the experimental group. The generalized improvement in reading rate may be due to a practice effect. Students were aware that they were being timed during the treatments and this concern may have transferred to increased rates

on the posttest. Additionally, it may be that the phrased text treatment acted to retard the rate gains made by the experimental group. This hypothesis is supported by post treatment surveys of students in the experimental treatment. Several students mentioned in the surveys that the phrased text forced them to slow down in their reading and to think more about the meaning of the text. This slowing of reading rate may have transferred to reading conventional texts. But slowing down and paying attention did not lead to improvements in comprehension.

The results of this study are somewhat ambivalent. The brevity of the treatments tend to obscure the findings. At best, it can be suggested that a transfer was observed in the form of a relative slowing of the subjects' reading rate. Because of the lack of main effects for comprehension, no instructional suggestions can be made from these results. The call for further research, however is indicated. Some tentative suggestions and hypotheses for further research may be worth considering. First, any phrased text treatment that attempts to demonstrate a transfer effect needs to be of considerable intensity and duration. Subjects need to read many phrased text selections over a long period of time. A minimum treatment period of six weeks should be considered. Second, although not clearly demonstrated in the present study, the phrased text treatment may act to slow reading rate on texts that are conventionally formatted. This hypothesis should be investigated further. Moreover, the significance of such an effect must be considered. Does the slowing of reading rate act to facilitate or inhibit overall reading performance? It may be that for many poorer readers the slowing of

reading rate allows the reader to process the meaning of the text more fully than was previously possible.

Despite the lack of significant main effects for comprehension in this exploratory study, the study does help point the way for future work. Investigations into the use of phrased texts over longer training periods should continue. Moreover, future studies may wish to employ phrase cues that are potentially less distracting than slash marks. Nevertheless past research has indicated promising results for the use of phrased texts in improving reading performance. The present study does suggest that some sort of transference occurs after a brief series of treatments. Future research should help specify the applicability of the use of phrased texts in conventional instructional settings.

TABLE 1

Means and Standard Deviations for Comprehension and Rate Measures

Measure	Mean	Standard Deviation
Experimental		
Comprehension Pre	37.71	10.40
Comprehension Post	43.81	10.00
Rate Pre	210.35	44.37
Rate Post	220.80	62.52
Control		
Comprehension Pre	36.48	9.76
Comprehension Post	42.76	8.54
Rate Pre	224.45	56.85
Rate Post	266.30	57.35

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